

SONICYOUTH's guitars have mostly been handled by 4 crew techs since 1990. On the 2009 occasion of Fender's new Lee + Thurston model Jazzmasters, the sound guy called them up to ask about the evolution of their guitars over that time...

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photo by Eric



Lee in Roma 070707 by Matt Zivich



Thurston at Bonnaroo 061303 by Erika Goldring

NIC CLOSE INTERVIEW
gtr tech stage R, drum tech. 1990-present.



photo by Eric

Aaron: What class of Sonic Youth did you enter in?

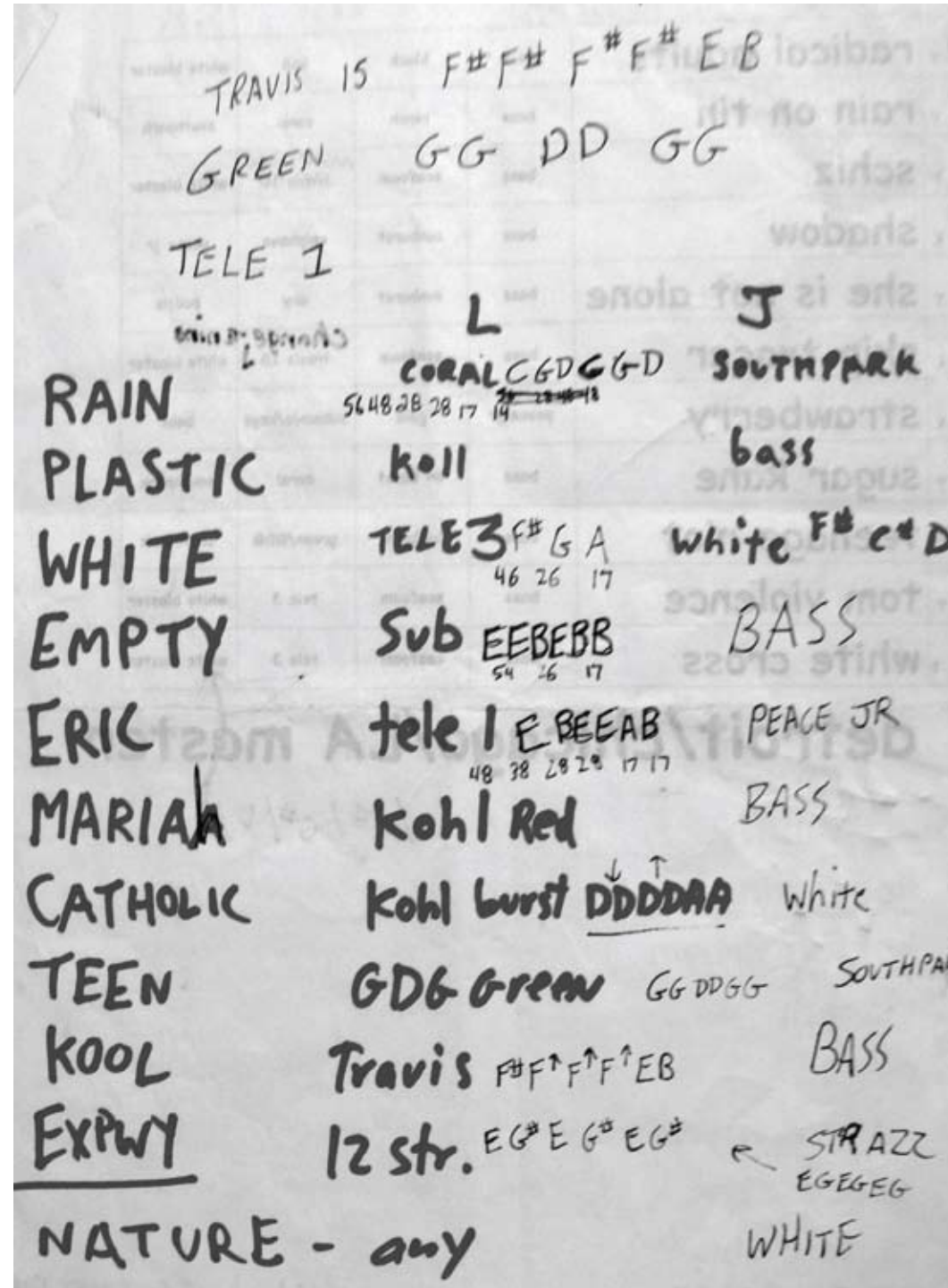
Nic: I think I'm spring of '90. The Kool Thing video had just been released. I came out and did an east coast run of shows in May or so.

Aaron: How far had the modifications of the guitars gone at that point? Was the idea of ripping out all the electronics from a Jazzmaster de rigueur?

Nic: Yeah when I interviewed with Lee over the phone I said 'I know you guys are using a lot of Mustangs and Jazzmasters and I know those things have a lot of crazy circuitry' and he said 'Oh, no, we just rip all that out'. I don't know who the first person to rip the electronics out of a Jazzmaster for Sonic Youth was. When I walked in it just seemed obvious, how could it be any other way? At least for Sonic Youth. I assume they ripped the stuff out themselves early on.

Aaron: How did the string gauges come about?

Nic: When I came on the scene the guitars just sort of were what they were. They worked, they were exactly what they needed to be. No one seemed to have thought about such basics as 'How can we make these tunable' or 'How can we change the strings?' or any of that stuff. The strings were just sets of 10's de-tuned. Lee had lots of guitars which had pairs of strings but there would be unison strings where it would be a 13 and a 10 or something. So eventually we worked out how to rationalize things so that strings would be at a more even tension and you could do a better setup. And



sometimes that worked and sometimes Thurston would come back and say 'Dude, I can't play it like this. Put the 17 back in and drop tune it 4 steps' or whatever it was.

Aaron: What makes an SY guitar an SY guitar for you?

Nic: The deeper answer is: Is it an instrument which has been in the fog of the band long enough to evolve from sort of a generic guitar into an instrument which is nearly song-specific. Or at least tuning and technique specific. The mojo? Is that a legitimate answer?

Aaron: I guess what I'm trying to get at is, in what way do these Thurston and Lee models capture the essence of what a Sonic Youth guitar is? They are very utilitarian in a way.

Nic: Well there's sort of the apocryphal story of Thurston getting grief from somebody about his treatment of a guitar and his response being 'Man, it's a piece of wood with some strings on it.'

Aaron: I guess what to me is neat about this pair of guitars is that they streamline all of the excess electronics out, they look super cool in a minimalist way, just the essence of a Jazzmaster, almost the cartoon version. But they are really meant to be played and stickered and beat up and customized. They're not in any way supposed to be a museum piece.

Nic: And I think that's the beauty of it. Sonic Youth has spent 28-odd years kind of evolving the next Stratocaster, in a weird way. You know, when the Strat came out it was the working man's guitar. Everybody loved it because it was easy to work on and it sounded good and you could play it forever. And that's kind of what these are. They are rock-solid guitars for anybody who wants to play them or customize them.

Aaron: Is there any way that, for you, Sonic Youth's guitars say something more about the band?

Nic: My welcome to the club, wool-pulled-from-the-eyes moment came at what I think was the first show I worked for them, in Baltimore in 1990. At the end of the night I was packing up the guitars and I asked Lee where they like to store the whammy bars for the guitars and Lee just said 'Oh no, you just shut it in there.' And proceeded to demonstrate by slamming the case lid on a Jazzmaster with the whammy bar in it. And I couldn't believe either that A) it was that easy or B) that he had just done that. In my mind I could just see the springs under constant pressure and the strings totally slacked out. It seemingly violated every possible precept of the instrument. Except it obviously didn't, because they had made it this far. It was an amazing little moment. The orthodoxy had been completely thrown out the window and it was purely about 'How do I make this work for me? How do I make this mine?'

fender humbucker by Matt



21	T	radical adults	bass	black	koll	white blaster
22	T	rain on tin	bass	black	coral	southpark
23	T	schiz	bass	seafoam	NEW KOLL 11/2/15	white blaster
24	K	shadow	bass	sunburst	epiphone	peace jr
25	T	she is not alone	bass	sunburst	any	pedals
26	L	skip tracer	bass	seafoam	change 9/10 travis 15	white blaster
27	K	strawberry	peace jr	gold	subsonic/keys	bass
28	T	sugar kane	bass	64 bullet	coral	southpark
29	T	teenage riot	bass	64 bullet	green/GDG	southpark
30	T	tom violence	bass	seafoam	tele 3	white blaster
31	T	white cross	bass	seafoam	tele 3	white blaster

detroit/chicago/LA masters
 MARIAM
 KATHOLIC
 TEEN
 KOOL
 EXPMY
 NATURE - any

ERIC BAECHT INTERVIEW

gtr tech stage L . 1998- present.



Aaron: Hey Eric when did you start?

Eric: October of '98

Aaron: Were you aware what they were doing with guitars before that?

Eric: Oh yeah I'd known what they were doing for 10 years or more. I always thought what they did with guitars was really great, and then when I started working on the guitars, tuning them up and stuff, it was like 'Oh, this is Sonic Youth. I'm playing a Sonic Youth song.'

Aaron: Did you know about the modifications, in terms of taking out the electronics and things?

Eric: Well I'd been taking apart and putting back together my Stratocaster since I was a kid, but I thought 'Oh those Jazzmasters have lots of crazy electronics in 'em. What am I gonna do if something goes wrong?' And I talked to Jim Vincent who I was taking over from and he said 'Oh, we just tear all that stuff out.' So that was a relief. You know, even around the time that I joined up with them they had a few Jazzmasters- it was sort of the guitar for the main songs. But Thurston has finally switched over to almost all Jazzmasters at this point. A few years ago we were talking and he had a Jazzmaster in his hand and he said something like 'I think this is it' or he just said something to the effect that this is the guitar. There's no question of really playing another guitar.

Aaron: What do you think makes an SY guitar an SY guitar?

Eric: Well a Sonic Youth guitar becomes a real Sonic Youth guitar after it's just been played the hell out of! Sometimes a new guitar comes in, and you don't really know if

it's gonna last. If it's gonna pass muster. Until it's really been toured and proven and put through the paces and you've seen if it's a survivor or not.

Aaron: Nic and I were talking about Thurston's comment of a guitar just being 'A piece of wood with some strings on it'.

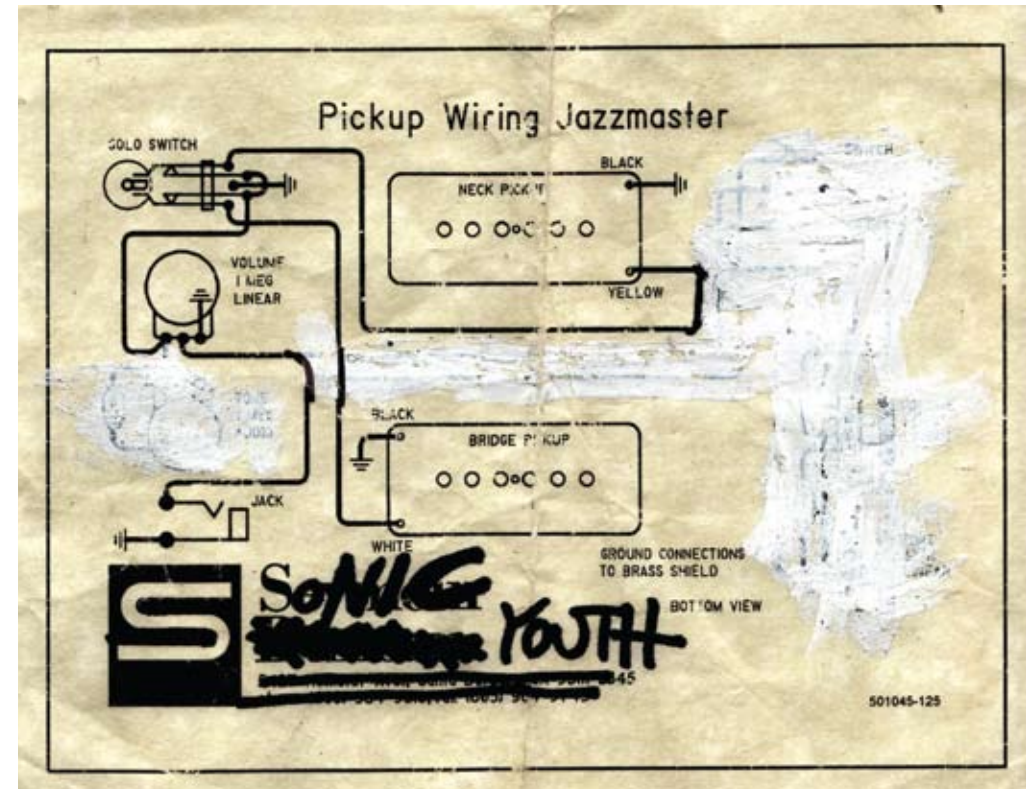
Eric: There's something about the feel of 'em though. You know when we were trying to put these new Fender guitars together, how the term 'plastic-y' was being thrown around a lot?

Aaron: Yeah.

Eric: And that's a term that Thurston had used, that I picked up from him about new guitars. And I think that's one of the things about these Sonic Youth Jazzmasters, if I could speak for them, or at least speaking for myself, it should feel like a piece of wood with some strings on it, and not a piece of plastic with strings on it.

Aaron: But it's cool that these aren't 'antiqued' or fake old or anything.

Eric: No, they're just a cool pair of guitars that Thurston and Lee would wanna play. Everyone can do their own distressing.



SY Jazzmaster wiring diagram by Eric

JIM VINCENT INTERVIEW

gtr tech stage L, drum tech. 1992-1998, 2007.



Aaron: Jim when did you start with Sonic Youth?

Jim: Fall of '92. Back then Thurston had a few pedals and a few guitars, and Lee had a tremendous amount of pedals and a lot of guitars. So I took care of Thurston, Kim, and Steve and Nic took care of Lee and it kind of averaged out.

Aaron: I sent you some pictures of the works in progress.

Jim: I like the black headstocks! I'm a huge fan of matched headstocks. And I think that's kind of the Sonic Youth/Mascis/Dinosaur Jr. thing – the matched-headstock era of the \$250-\$350 Jazzmaster. But the black headstock with the matching pickguard is sort of more special – it looks like they threw on a neck that they found – which is what we used to do! It was just like, 'Well, that guitar's trashed, we have some other neck...'

Aaron: How did it end up that Thurston plays the tune-o-matic style bridge and Lee plays the Mustang bridge?

Jim: We started making conversions because, you know, the band – although I don't remember an instance where they said 'Hey this doesn't sound right' – for me and Nic we wanted to pick up the level and well, the bridges were falling apart. We were trying to step it up for the band because you know, now the band are paying two guitar techs... It's like maybe the guitars should stay in tune a little bit better at least – and we discovered that the intonation was wildly off. I know it's a bit of a Sonic Youth thing to have notes beating against one another, but when we were replacing the bridges we found that because the string tensions were so severe – I don't think Thurston used anything less than a .17 at that point – just putting bridges back in the same place didn't

fix the intonation. And you can't easily move back a Fender Mustang/Jazzmaster/Jaguar bridge because they've got those cylinders that plop down in, and which the bridge then wobbles around in and screws up your intonation anyway. So trying to plug the guitar and do all that – I mean we were doing this on top of roadcases... So we started putting in the tune-o-matics because it was much easier to just re-tap a much smaller hole. And there's no wobble.

And for Lee we discovered that you take those Fender bridges, which wobble, and you take out the saddle from the Jazzmaster which has all the slots for the strings, and you put in a Mustang saddle because it only has one slot per string. And before you do that you wrap a couple of winds of electrical tape around the male part of the bridge, stuff it back in and it's locked in- no wobble.

We were changing out the jack plates – which is something that would be cool to have on these guitars – a piece of metal with a guitar jack on it, because Thurston would always break those out.

Aaron: What's interesting – I don't know if you can see it in that picture, but the pickguards for both are black anodized metal and the Thurston one does have a sort of Jaguar-style cutout just like you're talking about.

Jim: Oh good! Because Thurston would just break pickguards all the time. We were still a little green and didn't know about 90 degree guitar plugs at that point so we were replacing jacks all the time and realized we needed a plate there.

Aaron: How about pulling out the electronics of the guitars?

Jim: Eventually we just took all the surplus electronics out of everything. There was a phase around '92-'93 where all of that stuff was failing. By '98 we would just take the electronics out of everything as soon as we bought it. Before that the electronics would fail, or else there would be operator error – like 'Why did it sound like that tonight?' and you know somehow the roller controls on the Jazzmaster would get engaged and then the guitar would sound funky, and then we'd think it was a pedal or an amp and eventually it was just 'We gotta get rid of those.' But these Jazzmasters look great. And you know, Thurston used to have a blue Jazz with a black headstock. And that was a really dominant guitar – Kool Thing, Catholic Block, 100%, Shadow of a Doubt. That one had a no-brand black headstock on it.

Aaron: We were wondering about calling Lee's the Jazzblaster, which is what he calls them with the humbuckers in there, but I guess that didn't make sense from the perspective of people who are actually trying to sell these guitars in stores.

Jim: Yeah we started calling them that because those pickups are just so loud. The Tele Deluxe has those, and you know it was nice to have at least one guitar that didn't make a lot of racket, at some of those gigs with florescent lights and such. And Nic started tracking down more of those pickups and somebody put them in a Jazzmaster at some point. In my notes from around '93 there is one listed as Jazzblaster, so there must have been just one at that point.



L J

- 1 ~~White cross~~ Golden Blue
- 2 Rain on tin
- 3 Plastic Sun
- 4 PAPER CUP PEACE ATTACK
- 5 ~~Pressure~~ ~~PEACE ATTACK PATTERN~~
- 6 ~~PATTERN~~ PEACE PATTERN
- 7 DUDE
- 8 MOTE
- 9 UNMADE BED
- 10 Drippins Overm
- 11 ~~MAKING~~ L
- 12 ~~MAKING~~ Stones

- 1
- 2 CORAL SOUTH
- 3 Kohl BASS
- 4 12 SOUTH CAPO4
- 5 SUB SOUTH
- 6 CORAL BASS
- 7 CORAL BASS
- 8 GREEN SG
- 9 Kohl SOUTH
- 10 Kohl SG
- 11 Kohl bass
- 12 Kohl SG
- any bass
- any SG
- SG ↓ 1/2 step

- New Hampshire
- ~~MAKING~~ NATURE SCENE

White cross

Tele3

MATT ZIVICH INTERVIEW

gtr tech stage R. 2004-present.



Aaron: How long have you been working with Sonic Youth, Matt?

Matt: On and off for about 4 or 5 years.

Aaron: Wow I guess I should stop thinking of you as the new guy! Before you worked for them you knew a little bit about the guitars and stuff?

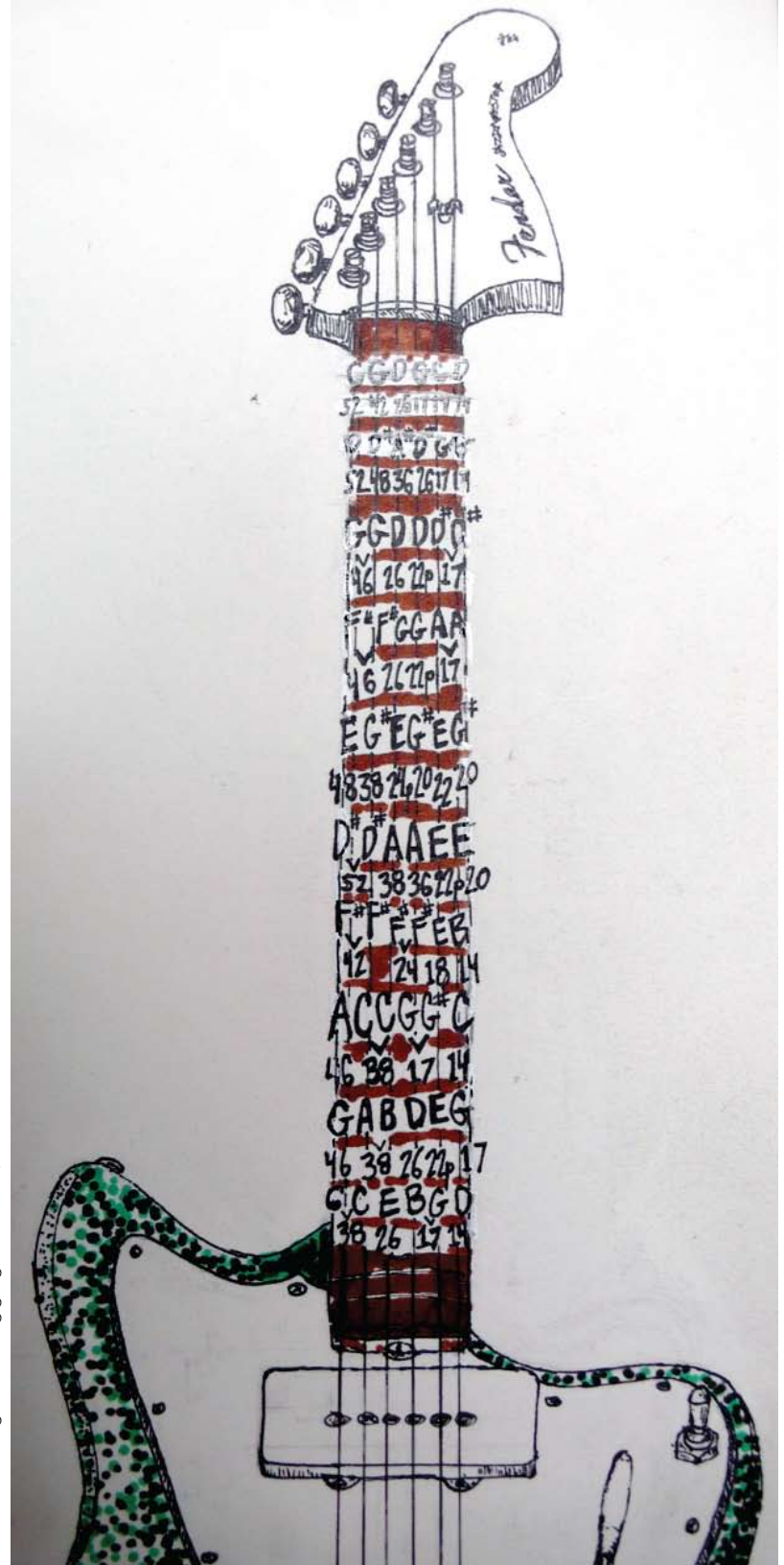
Matt: Yeah you know from being a fan of the band and being into guitars, when I was younger I was just into the fact that they had tons of guitars and they were all screwed up and customized.

Aaron: Now that you've spent time with the guitars, what do you think distinguishes a Sonic Youth guitar?

Matt: Well, the guys don't really, for cosmetic reasons, they don't care if the guitars get beat up necessarily. They don't necessarily think they should keep a guitar looking a certain way for the value. That's pretty cool. They have these guitars from the 60's that are worth some money, but it's not about that for them.

Aaron: Talking to Nic and Eric it came up that these ones that Fender is making are sort of like a blank canvas. They are asking to be beat up and modified and stickered.

Matt: I think it will be cool if that's what people actually do, instead of holding on to them and keeping them in the case, if instead they actually screw around with the guitars in different ways than most people, getting different sounds out of them, not always playing them traditionally.



SY tunings and string gauges, drawn by Matt

Aaron: Do you ever find yourself thinking ‘Oh my god these guys, what are they doing to the guitars?’

Matt: Well as my job is being the person to take care of the guitars, sometimes I might cringe at what is done on stage. You know, just looking out for everybody the next day, making sure everything will work again at the beginning of the next show. But I’ve gotten over the fact that the guitars are going to be thrown around, and maybe dropped, and beaten with sticks and screwdrivers- and also there’s the possibility of them maybe falling into an audience member’s hands. So you just have to be ready for whatever.

Aaron: Nic tells a story about his first day, asking Lee what should be done with a Jazzmaster tremolo arm and Lee just looking at him mystified and asking ‘What are you talking about?’ and then slamming the lid closed. I mean, these days you guys permanently fix the bars in there—with a zip tie (see pic)—so that’s not even an option. Which seemed a bit extreme on a production model, so these guitars don’t ship that way.

Matt: Well that’s a good first modification for people to do, just fix it in there, you know. First you file out a little trench at the end of the tremolo arm and then you throw the zip tie on there. Totally just, that arm has to stay on the guitar, it’s part of the guitar.

Aaron: If you got one of these guitars straight from Fender, if you got the Lee model, and you were setting it up for Lee to play, what would you do to it?

Matt: Well, you’d have to change the strings for whatever tuning he wanted to use the guitar in, and maybe the nut would have to be filed out to fit the strings. Maybe file the bridge too. The tremolo arm would have to be fixed in place, and the intonation set up. I guess the electronics would already be gutted, so I’d just write the tuning on the back of the headstock, and well I guess Lee would do the rest. He would do the ‘relic-ing.’

Aaron: I was saying to Eric that I thought it was cool that they weren’t already ‘reliced’ coming from the factory.

Matt: Maybe we could say something about you know, just take the guitar and plug it in and drag it along the floor!



photo by Eric

OCALS		KIM	THURSTON	LEE	JIM
T	rain on tin	bass	black	CGD CGD coral	GG DEGB southpark
K	plastic sun	ibanez	black	GG D GGA koll	bass
L	eric's trip	bass	drifter	EBEEAB Tele 1	peace jr
	city grass	bass	black	GG D GGA koll	G D D# SG
	unmade bed	bass	black	koll	GG DEGB southpark (SG)
K	CATHOLIC BLOCK mariah	pe	black	GG D GGA AFTER CHANGE TO GGDGGA koll	bass
	maaco	bass	black	koll	G D D# SG
T	empty page	eterna	black	EEEBBB subsonic	bass
L	karenology	eterna	black	GG D GGA koll	bass
K	shadow	bass	F#F#EB	ziphphone	peace jr
K	bro james	bass	blue	G D D# zen/GDt	G D D# SG
T	peace attack	bass	black	EEEBBB subsonic	GG DEGB southpark
K	nature scene	voc.	blue bass	any	G D D# SG

Saturday November 8, 2003 ATP Long Beach, CA by Queen May

Re Groen
Re Str. Brown koll For koll B.U.

SY zip-tied trem arm!

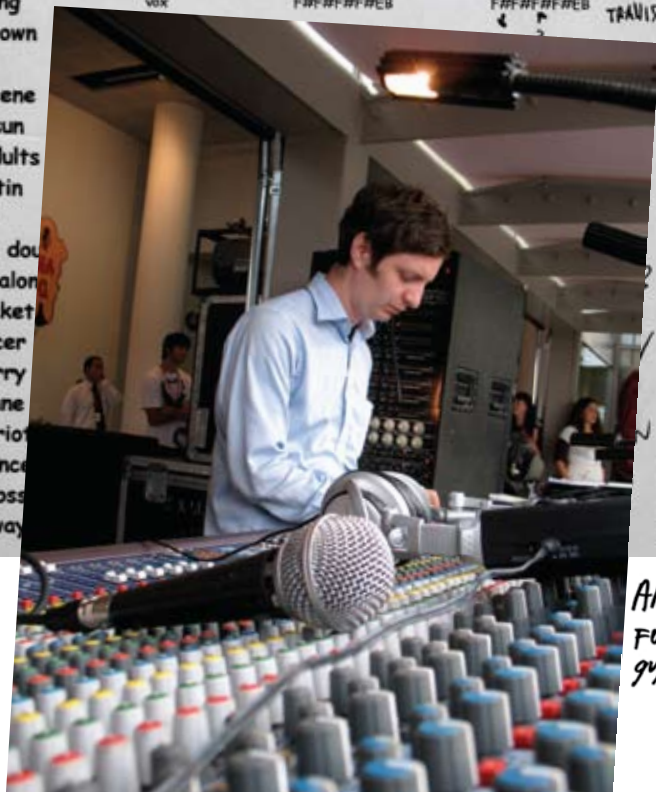
B 14
E 18
F# 24W
F# 42
F# 42
F# 42

D# 17
D# 17
D 22P
D 26
G 46
G 46

G# 11
E 17
G# 19
E 26
G# 30
E 46

A 17
A 17
G 26
G 26
F# 46
F# 46

pattern recognition	E E B B F# F# F#	G G D D D# D# F#	LEE C G D C G D	JIM bass
unmade bed	bass	G G D G C D	5.B koh? G G D G G A	SOUTH PARK G G D E G B
dripping dream	bass	G G D G C D	koh?	(G G D D D# D#) - SG
mariah stones	E E B B F# F# F#	G G D G C D	5. II koh? G G D G G A	bass
dude ranch nurse	G G D D D# D#	G G D D D# D#	koh?	SG/TURENG? SG
new hampshire paper cup	D A D A B B / capo 5	G G D G C D	coral?	bass
I love you golden peace attack	bass	E G# F# G# F# E G#	koh?	bass
100%	bass	F# F# F# F# F# B	fender 12 / E G#	G G D E G B / capo 4 SOUTH 88 F# G
bro james bull	bass	G G D D D# D#	coral / organ?	G G D E G B capo 11 .. F# F# C# D#
burning spear candle	bass	F# F# F# F# F# B	subsonic? E E B E B E	G G D E G B
catholic block disconnection	bass	F# F# F# F# F# B		
drunken empty page	D A D A B B	G G D G C D		
eric's trip inhuman	vox	F# F# G G A A		
karenology kill yr idols	D A D A B B	G G D G C D		
kissability kool thing	bass	E E B# B#		
kotton krown mote	ibanez	P-bass		
nature scene plastic sun	D A D A B B	G G D G C D		
radical adults rain on tin schiz	bass	G G D D D# D#		
shadow of a dou she is not alone	vox	A C C G G# C		
silver rocket skip tracer	vox	F# F# F# F# F# B		
strawberry sugar kane				
teenage riot tom violence				
white cross expressway				



AARON MULLAN
FOH mixer, studio guy. 2002-present.



Nic and Eric on Sonic Guitar String Gauges

Apr 2009

String gauges and sets are the aspect of the SY guitars I feel most responsible for—I made quite a few changes to the stringing of both Lee and Thurston's guitars when I first came on, and much of that work got handed off to Jim Vincent when he took over on stage left. (Keith Nealy generally just handed Kim and Thurston guitars I had tuned previously, I did not realize how hands off Keith was until Reading '91 when the wheels came off in a slightly spectacular fashion...) As I mentioned in my interview with Aaron, Thurston corrected a couple of my changes, but many of them are still in place, and Lee always just asked for heavier—the original baseline set was 46, 26, 17.

Lee sets kind of depend on era obviously, but I always begin a set design from 48 x 2, 28 x 2, 17 x 2 and push up (meaning heavier) from there, very occasionally I will string something too heavily, but I feel like I can count those instances on one hand. GDG, and DDA are the root examples of the 48,28,17 principle. L#GA runs that way, GDD# is a restrung variant. The current Kool Thing/Death Valley tuning is based on this (although it has 3 28's in the middle and ends with a 20). EBEEAB is a variant on the 48,28,17 theme.

As a tour progresses Lee's hands usually get stronger and the strings begin getting heavier moving more towards 52's on the low end and sometimes towards 20's on the high.

Later period tunings and sets get a little more esoteric: CDGCDG (Coral Jazz) is a good example of this, where the 3rd string is tuned below the 4th string and is therefore heavier than the 4th string. My memory is Thurston used to run two or three guitars with this kind of floppy-on-the-treble side set up, but that is definitely and Eric or Jim question at this point.

Talk to you all soon,

Nic

I'd say the main difference between Lee & T's is Lee's tend to be heavy & thick for that great clanky sound, & T's tend to be not quite as tight, more bendy; yet still the thinnest gauge on any sonic guitar is .014.

In the last couple years Thurston's been writing more on his acoustic, with a set around 12-52, so that will actually be pretty close for a lot of the new stuff. Once the tunings get adapted to the Jazzmaster the gauges naturally get modded a bit.

Eric



*Lee Ranaldo Jazzmaster –
Based upon Lee's iconic 'Jazzblasters'*

Sapphire Blue transparent with satin black headcap

*2 Newly revoiced and improved Fender wide range
Humbucker reissue pickups (voiced to Lee's specs)*

Fender Mustang Bridge

Vintage frets and 7.25" fretboard radius.

Black Anodized Aluminum pickguard.

*Streamlined electronics- no rhythm circuit/
one volume knob*

Vintage style nickel hardware

Pickup selector switch 'side to side' instead of up/down.

Signature on back of headstock.

*includes 'Sonic Jazzmaster/Jazzblaster' zine with SY crew
interviews and sticker sheet with new artist-designed
and vintage Sonic gtr stickers.*

photo by Eric

Thurston Moore Jazzmaster

*Forest Green Transparent with satin
black headcap*

*2 Seymour Duncan Antiquity
pickups with aged covers.*

Adjust-o-matic bridge

Jumbo frets and 7.25" fretboard radius.

*Black Anodized Aluminum pickguard
with split control assembly.*

*Streamlined electronics- no rhythm
circuit/one volume knob*

Vintage style nickel hardware

*Pickup selector switch 'side to side'
instead of up/down.*

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